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NOTE

ON

THE KÛRDISH LANGUAGE.

BY

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IN the third volume of the *Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, Goettingen, 1840, there is an article of sixty-three pages, by Professors Roediger and Pott of Halle, entitled *Kûrdish Studies*. Some of the facts of more general interest contained in this article are here presented.

The principal sources of information, in regard to the Kûrds and their language, are the following:

1. *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan*, by the late Claudius James Rich, edited by his widow, in two volumes, London, 1836.
2. The communications of the missionary Hoernle in the *Baseler Missions-magazin*, for 1836 and 1837.
3. *Grammatica e Vocabolario della lingua Kurda, composti dal P. Maurizio Garzoni de' Predicatori Ex-Missionario Apostolico*, Rome, 1787. Mr. Rich, during his residence in Sulimania, and in his travels in various parts of the country, collected much valuable information. The missionary Hoernle resided a long time in the city Shûsha, and aiming especially at the conversion of the Kûrds, gave much attention to their language. The Grammar of Garzoni is the main source of our knowledge of the Kûrdish language. It is a small octavo of two hundred and eighty-eight pages, and contains a grammar, reading-lessons, a glossary, etc. The

author confines himself mainly to the dialect spoken in the territory of Amadia. He lived eighteen years among the Kûrds. What is found on this subject in Adelung's *Mithridates* is merely a recapitulation from Garzoni. The *Researches of Smith and Dwight*, in two volumes, Boston, 1833, contain some information in regard to the Kûrds. We may add that the volumes of the *Missionary Herald*, from 1835 to 1851, communicate a variety of important facts in respect to Kûrdistan.

The Kûrdish language prevails over the entire country from Armenia on the North to the region of Baghdad on the South, and from the Tigris on the West to Azerbaijan on the East. In the winter, the nomad Kûrds descend to the plains with their flocks. Single clans and families sometimes wander as far as the Persian Gulf, Damascus, Asia Minor, etc. The Zagros, the highest mountain-ridge in Kûrdistan, divides the country into two unequal parts. The western embraces a great part of ancient Assyria, between the Tigris and the Zagros; the eastern includes a part of ancient Media. The whole population is supposed to be between two and three millions. The Kûrds fall into two divisions, namely, the clans or tribes, *Assireta*, and the settled peasants, *Guran*. They are of very different races. The Guran, especially on the Persian side, are much the most numerous, being in the proportion of four or five to one of the Assireta. The latter are the invading victors; the Guran are in the position of serfs.

The Kûrdish language belongs, radically, to the Persian family. This is shown, incontrovertibly, by the grammatical germ, and by the main lexical contents. It has a still nearer relation to the modern Persian; but it has degenerated farther than that, by the corruption of its sounds, by the disappearance of inflections and derivation-suffixes, the substitution of periphrastic forms with auxiliaries for simple verbs, etc. The modern Persian, by its cultivation as a written language, has attained a firmer position, and a sort of security against a rapid decline; while the Kûrdish, as a popular idiom, wholly abandoned to the arbitrary caprice of general intercourse, has sunk down, without hindrance, to a lower stage of corruption. It seems to have stood somewhat nearer to the Parsî, though dialectically different, up to the time when the latter became a

written dialect, but then to have gone on its peculiar path, at a more rapid rate. Both these related dialects are about equally removed from the Zend, and they stand to each other rather in the relation of cousins german than in that of sisters. To mark the relation more precisely, the Kûrdish stands to the modern written Persian somewhat as the Milanese popular idiom stands to the more cultivated Tuscan written language. In one respect, the Kûrdish and the Persian have fared alike, namely, that since the irruption of Islam into their abodes, they have received a multitude of Arabic words, which exercise a wide control, especially in combination with native auxiliary verbs, e. g. *to make, to give, to be*. At a later period, there was a new, but much smaller addition, of Turkish words, particularly in the western and north-western parts of Kûrdistan. But neither the Turkish, nor the Arabic addition has exerted any essential influence on the internal grammatical form. The addition remains isolated; it is only borrowed, and it can be peeled off without difficulty from the genuine Kûrdish kernel. Some Greek words, used by the Kûrds, were introduced by the Arabs and Turks, as their form for the most part clearly shows; or they have had a firm hold in Central Asia from ancient times, and hence are not alien to the Persian. The Aramean words, forming a small part of the borrowed stock, were in the first instance received, for the most part, from the Syrian and Chaldee Christians, so that the talk of there being an original Chaldaic element in the Kûrdish, if thereby Aramean is meant, is wholly groundless.

The Kûrdish has a great multitude of dialects, more or less separate from each other. Different writers enumerate, some a greater number, some a less. Hoernle remarks that the northern dialects are mostly so related, mutually, that the Kûrds of different provinces could understand each other without much difficulty. Three principal dialects are in use among the northern tribes, beside that of the Yezidis. These four have various branches, used by the Kûrds who live on the mountains West, South-West, and North-West of Orûmiah, and thence extending to Sinna, Sulimania, Diarbekr and Vân. In respect to the southern Kûrdish stock, Hoernle could not gain information equally satisfactory. He mentions five dialects as belonging to it. The

tribes which use them, dwell in the valleys of the Zagros, South of Sinna and Kermanshah, down to Loristan. It will be easily seen that our notices of these dialects are too fragmentary to enable us to give any good classification.

Most of the Kûrds, particularly the principal men, speak, in addition to their vernacular, either the Persian, or the Turkish, the first in the East and South-East, the last in the West, where individuals here and there understand Arabic. The Kûrds commonly use the Persian, or the Turkish, in their written communications. In the schools which they have here and there, a little Persian and Arabic is taught, but not the smallest portion of their vernacular tongue; by far the most of the Kûrds know not how to read or write any language. There is, consequently, no proper Kûrdish literature; the language has scarcely raised itself to a written form. It is very seldom that the Kûrds commit to writing letters, or songs, in their native language. That they have their popular songs, which they sing in their monotonous and melancholy strains, is well known. Rich often listened to their melodies and responsive songs. The most complete Kûrdish text which we have, was communicated by the missionary Hoernle. It is in two MSS., one quarto, the other octavo, and consists of Kûrdish poems in the Guran dialect, as spoken in the vicinity of Kermanshah. The quarto MS. contains, in about three thousand eight hundred and seventy rhymed double lines, the history of Khosru and Shirin, translated, as it would seem, from the Persian, and written at the close of 1825-6. The octavo MS. by a different hand, contains four poems, in four hundred and fifty, seven hundred, four hundred, and six hundred and twenty double lines, respectively.

In a second part of this article, Prof. Pott goes at some length into the nature of the sounds of the language. The general subject is pursued in the fourth, fifth and seventh volumes of the *Zeitschrift*, under the title, *Natural-Historical Notes, from the Kûrdish and other languages of Western Asia*. It is hoped that, by the labors of American and other missionaries, this interesting field will soon be thoroughly explored.